

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FH 5571

EUGENE V. DEBS

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Socialist,  
Revolutionary  
1855-1926**

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FOLKWAYS FH 5571

An Historical Narrative written and produced by Bernard Sanders

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

# EUGENE V. DEBS



## *Trade Unionist, Socialist, Revolutionary*

An historical narrative written and produced by Bernard Sanders, Director: The American People's Historical Society, Burlington, Vermont.

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### **Band 1. Introduction**

It is very probable, especially if you are a young person, that you have never heard of Eugene Victor Debs. If you are the average American who watches television 40 hours a week you have probably heard of such important people as Kojack and Wonder Woman, have heard about dozens of different kinds of underarm spray deodorants, every hack politician in

your state, and the latest game between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees. Strangely enough, however, nobody has told you much about Gene Debs — one of the most important Americans of the 20th century.

Why? Why haven't they told you about Gene Debs and the ideas he fought for? The answer is simple. More than a half century after his death the handful of people who own and control this country—including the mass media and the educational system—still regard Debs and his ideas as dangerous—as a threat to their stability and class rule—and as someone best forgotten about.

When he ran for President the fifth time in 1920, as the candidate of the Socialist Party, Eugene V. Debs was 65 years old. He was also an inmate in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.

Imprisoned for a ten year sentence by President Woodrow Wilson's Administration for opposing America's participation in World War I, a war which he considered to be an imperialist venture fought between national ruling classes and using the working class of both sides as cannon fodder, out-spent by the Republicans and Democrats by more than a hundred to one, almost a million Americans voted for convict Eugene V. Debs to be their president. Who was Gene Debs?

### **Band 2. An Overview Of Eugene V. Debs**

Eugene V. Debs was a socialist, a revolutionary and probably the most effective and popular leader that the American working class has ever had.

Debs for President.

Let the wealth of the nation belong to all the people, and not just the millionaires.

Production for use, not for profit.

Workers—stand together.

We want Debs.

“Bread or Rev.”

For fifty years, until his death in 1926, Eugene V. Debs devoted his life to the struggles of the American, and international, working class.

When workers, earning starvation wages on the railroads and in many other industries, needed help in organizing unions to defend their interests against the powerful corporations—Debs was there. He helped organize dozens of unions—including the American Railway Union which at one time had a membership of 150,000.

When American workers needed a radical, independent political party to stand up to the Democratic and Republican parties which represented the interests of the capitalist class—Debs was there. He helped found the Socialist Party—and ran for President on its ticket 5 times.

When American workers needed a revolutionary industrial union which refused to compromise with their employers, Debs was there. In 1905, he was one of the organizers of the Industrial Workers of the World—the powerful I.W.W.

During and after the first World War, when free speech was virtually abolished in this country, when radicals and anti-war activists were thrown in jail for expressing their opinions, when newspapers were censored and closed down

by the government, when citizens were fired from their jobs because of their political views—Gene Debs was there. On numerous occasions he put his life on the line by speaking out against the imperialist slaughter taking place in Europe.

In September 1918, when the court was about to sentence him to his jail sentence for opposing World War I, the 63 year old Debs fixed his eyes upon the presiding judge and spoke his philosophy of life.

“Your honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living things, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class I am in it, while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.”

Unlike the capitalist politicians and labor leaders of his day, or this day, such as Samuel Gompers and the leadership of the American Federation of Labor, Eugene Debs was a man who had a vision—a vision that life on this planet could be something of beauty, joy and cooperation. He refused to believe that the suffering that he saw all about him—the poverty, ignorance, war and exploitation was caused by God or nature. He believed rather, that much of human suffering was caused by an irrational and cruel economic system—capitalism—which functioned not to improve the quality of life for all the people, but simply to enrich the bank accounts of the few who owned and controlled the economy, men such as John D. Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan. And Debs believed that there could be no fundamental solution to the problems facing the vast majority of the people unless the capitalist system was overthrown and replaced by a socialist economy in which the working people took over the means of production—and worked for themselves, rather than for a boss.

### Band 3. Debs' View Of America

Debs, who came from the ranks of the working class, could see the horrible suffering caused by the capitalist system all around him.

In the east, he saw children working 14 hours a day in factories and sweat shops, and workers competing with their sons and daughters for jobs which paid subsistence wages. At Homestead, Pennsylvania he saw workers, attempting to improve their conditions, murdered by the hired thugs of Andrew Carnegie, that noble philanthropist, and in city after city he saw the festering tenement shacks where millions were forced to live.



In the south, he saw blacks terrorized, lynched and beaten, and poor whites indoctrinated with race hatred by their employers in order to prevent any chance of black-white working class unity.

In the west he saw lumbermen laboring under slave-like conditions, little boys working from sunrise to sunset in the mines. In Ludlow, Colorado he saw women and children shot down and burned alive by Rockefeller's police force during a long and bitter strike at the Colorado Coal Company.

Across the nation he could see politicians and judges bought and sold by John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Corporation, and the other big companies, and a political system in which women, and most blacks, didn't even have the right to vote.

### Band 4. Why Support The Socialist Party

Year after year, in thousands of meetings with workers, Debs repeated his message from one end of the country to the other.

In 1908, in New York City, Debs spoke before ten thousand people and the New York Times called it the greatest political meeting ever held in that city. In San Diego, California 15,000 workers paid their way to a Socialist Party meeting to hear him speak, and in Cincinnati, Ohio more people came to hear Debs than to hear William Howard Taft, the Republican candidate who was soon to become President.

Over and over again Debs raised the same basic issues: as he denounced the capitalist economic system and fought for the socialist revolution.

“Why should working people support the Socialist Party? Because it is the only party unequivocally committed to their economic interests, to the abolition of the wage system, and the freedom of the worker from exploitation and every other species of servitude.”

“Let no one charge that socialists have arrayed class against class in this struggle. That has been done long since in the evolution of capitalist society. One class now owns the tools while another class uses them. One class is small and rich and the other large and poor. One wants more profit and the other more wages. One consists of capitalists and the other of workers. There can be no peace and good will between these essentially antagonistic economic classes. Nor can the class conflict be covered up or smoothed over.”

### Band 5. Democrats, Republicans, and Capitalists

Every four years the Democratic and Republican parties come forward and tell the working people of this country all that they are going to do for them. How they are going to end unemployment, raise wages, lower prices and stop war. Gene Debs didn't believe a word of it. He believed that the only way that workers could protect their own interests was to have a political party of their own—a socialist party.

“The workers know that under Republican rule and Democratic rule, conditions for them have remained unchanged. They know that under the administration of both, depressions come, that unemployment is certain, and that many of their number are doomed to drift into poverty and crime and finally end their lives as beggars, suicides, in prison cells or on the scaffold.”

“They know, too, that under both Democrat and Republican rule the President is on the side of the capitalist, that the governors are all on the side of the capitalists, that Congress and all the state legislators respond to the demands of the capitalists, that the courts are uniformly with the capitalists,

while soldiers and injunctions and jails are for the exclusive benefit of the workers.”

“In capitalist society the working man is not, in fact, considered a man at all, but as a wage worker is bought and sold on the open market the same as hair, hides, salt or any other merchandise. In capitalist society the owner can pay a worker as low a wage as he can get away with, and then fire him the first day that he can no longer make a profit off of his labor. Is that what freedom is about, or is that what slavery is about—wage slavery.

Throughout his life Debs was hailed by many as a prophet, a Moses—a man who would lead the American working class out of the desert of capitalism, and into the promised land of socialism. But Debs rejected that role. He said that if the workers were dependent upon some famous leader to take them into socialism, then some other famous leader would come along a few years later and lead them right back into capitalist slavery. For Debs, the workers had to lead themselves, and take responsibility for their own lives.

“You as workers, do not need the capitalist. He could not exist an instant without you. You would just begin to live without him. You do everything and he has everything; and some of you imagine that if it were not for him you would have no work. As a matter of fact, he does not employ you at all. You employ him to take from you what you produce, and he faithfully sticks to his task. If you can stand it, he can; and if you don’t change this relation, I am sure he won’t.”

“We need, in this country and throughout the world, an economic system in which the working people own the means of production—and in which we produce goods and services for the use of all—and not for profits of the few.”

“Under socialism, men and women will work not as slaves, as they do today, but as free human beings—determining what is produced and how it is produced and will take satisfaction and pride in their work knowing that they, and their children, will be the beneficiaries of labor and not some capitalist parasite who has a piece of paper declaring himself to be the owner—although he may have never done a productive day’s work in his life.”

“The workers are the saviors of society, the redeemers of the human race; and when they have fulfilled their great historic mission and have overthrown the capitalist system, men and women can walk the highlands and enjoy the vision of a land without masters and without slaves, a land regenerated and resplendent in the triumph of freedom and civilization.”

### **Band 6. The Early Background of Eugene Debs**

Eugene V. Debs had not always been a socialist, or a revolutionary, or an enemy of the capitalist system. In fact, when he was a young man his views were rather conventional. It was not until he was 39 years old that he adopted his socialist principals.

Debs was born in Terre Haute, Indiana in November, 1855. His parents owned a small grocery store there. At the age of 14 he dropped out of high school and worked in a shop painting railway cars. At 16 he began work on the railroad as a fireman and, in 1875, when he was 20, he became Secretary of the newly organized Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen.

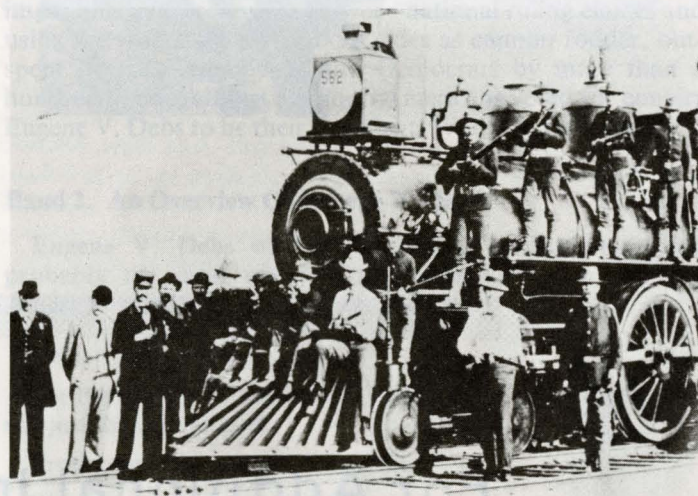
As a young labor leader Debs not only believed in capitalism, but was an active member of the Democratic Party—and was elected both City Clerk of Terre Haute and a member of the Indiana House of Representatives. Although the popular young Debs had an excellent future as a Democratic politician, he stopped running for office as a Democrat after one term in the Legislature when his bill in support of railroad

workers got whittled down to nothing by the politicians in the state capitol.

### **Band 7. The Formation And Fall Of The American Railway Union**

In 1892, after 17 years as Secretary of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, Debs resigned from that position. Over the years he gradually developed the belief, which he maintained for the rest of his life, that workers could not be successful in fighting their employers if they were organized into small, ineffectual craft unions—unions which often spent more time and energy competing against each other than in opposing their employers.

In June of 1893 Gene Debs and 50 other trade unionists formed the American Railway Union, an industrial union open to every railroad worker in America—regardless of the job performed. In one year’s time, through tireless organizing efforts, these men brought in 150,000 members—and created one of the largest unions in America—large enough to confront a major railroad.



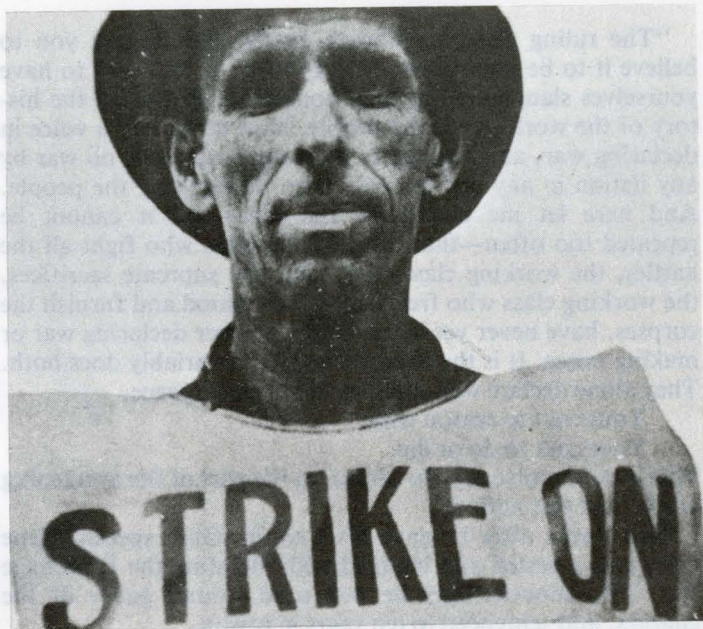
In March of 1894 big Jim Hill, the owner of the Great Northern Railway, cut the wages of the workers on his line for the 3rd time. He soon regretted that action—for the men of the newly formed A.R.U., led by President Debs, went out on strike against the Great Northern—and they won. From one end of the line to the other the locomotive wheels stopped turning. Hill threatened to call out the militia, he fired workers, he tried to play some of the workers off against the others—but for 18 days the men of the A.R.U. held firm and, instead of taking a cut in pay, they won a substantial wage increase—and the greatest victory ever won by railroad workers up to that time.

The great victory of Debs and the A.R.U. was destined, however, to be short lived. The owners of the railroads, staggered by their defeat at the hands of a unified, industrial union were determined to destroy the A.R.U.—and their efforts had the support of the entire American business community.

The victory of the A.R.U. in the Great Northern strike had made it clear to owners and workers alike that if industrial unionism could bring greater benefits to workers in the railroad industry, then it could do the same for workers in factories and mines across the country. For the people who owned America it was clear that the A.R.U. was a dangerous example which had to be stamped out before the idea of

industrial unionism could spread—and with the help of the President of the United States, the federal court system, the militia and the newspapers—it was.

In 1894 George M. Pullman, the owner of the Pullman Palace Car Company of Pullman, Illinois was paying the workers in his factory starvation wages. Unable to endure their unhuman conditions any longer, the Pullman workers struck the company, and appealed to Debs and the A.R.U. to boycott Pullman cars. The Union agreed, and the boycott soon evolved into a national rail strike involving 125,000 workers.



In order to break the strike, which was initially successful, the railroad companies persuaded President Grover Cleveland to send federal troops into Chicago—the center of the strike activity. In addition, a federal court issued a sweeping injunction against the leaders of the A.R.U.—ordering them to cease the boycott. Debs and the other Union leaders refused to obey the injunction. They realized that if they ended their strike not only would the cause of the Pullman workers be lost—but that their own Union would be destroyed as well.

But the Union was not strong enough to prevail against the combined forces of the government, the corporations and the newspapers—most of which put forward a steady stream of lies and distortions about Debs and the strike. Three weeks after the strike had begun, it was lost, the American Railway Union virtually annihilated, and Gene Debs, with other union leaders, were sent to jail in Woodstock, Illinois for defying the injunction.

#### **Band 8. Internalizing Socialist Thought**

Sitting in his prison cell for a six month term, Debs had time to reflect upon the events of the past year, and to think about a government which had come to the aid of millionaire railroad owners while destroying an organization fighting for the rights of starving workers. While in prison he also began reading socialist books and literature that friends were sending him, such as Marx's "Das Capital," and works by Karl Kautsky, the German Marxist.

Debs had entered the Woodstock jail in the Spring of 1895 as a militant trade unionist who was fighting for the rights of workers to earn a decent wage within the system. He left the

jail 6 months later as a radical socialist who believed that workers could never receive justice under the capitalist system—and that it was necessary for the working class, itself, to take over the means of production and the government.

In November of 1895, Eugene V. Debs was released from Woodstock jail. Probably no prisoner in American history has ever received a warmer welcome home. Despite bad weather, despite the fact that the strike he had just led had been defeated, despite the fact that newspapers throughout the country had been calling him an anarchist and the most dangerous man in America, over 100 thousand cheering workers surrounded Debs' train as it pulled into the Chicago station. The Chicago Evening News wrote: "No such demonstration as was made in Debs' honor yesterday and last night has been seen in this city for many years, if at all." These workers knew that in Gene Debs they had a friend and an honest leader—a man who had stood his ground against the President, the army, the courts, and the entire pack of monied interests. And like no other working class leader in America, they loved and respected him for it.

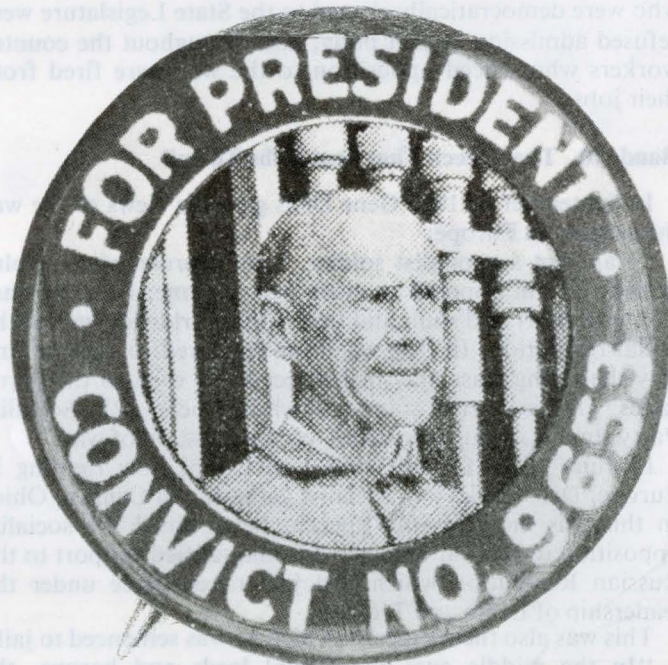
From this moment until his death in 1926, Debs devoted his driving energy to the struggle for socialism. In 1897, he helped convert what was left of the American Railway Union into a political movement called, "The Social Democracy."

#### **Band 9. Debs For President**

In 1900 he stood as the Presidential candidate of the Social Democratic Party, and in 1904 he ran again for President on the newly formed Socialist Party—receiving 400,000 votes.

In 1908 he was nominated for President by the Socialists for the 3rd time and he waged a vigorous campaign aboard a train called the "Red Special," stopping at every town along the line to speak to farmers and workers and to distribute literature. Always short on money, the Socialists gave Presidential candidate Debs a total of \$3.00 a day expenses during that campaign. The Democrats and Republicans were spending millions.

In 1912 the Socialist Party reached the pinnacle of its power in this country. With a membership that had grown to over 100,000—the Party had actually assumed the responsibility of



governing in many localities. In 1912 the Socialist Party controlled the administrations of 33 American cities, including Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Bridgeport, Connecticut and Berkeley, California—and Victor Berger, a Socialist leader, was a member of the United States Congress.



By 1917, however, with America's entry into the first World War and with the advent of the Russian Revolution, the Socialist Party began to decline. There were members who left the Party because of their disagreement with the Party's opposition to the war, but there were many others who left because they were simply afraid—afraid for their lives, afraid for their jobs, afraid of their government.

During times of war it is customary for the ruling class, in order to gain support for its war position, to whip up a patriotic hysteria among the people—and there has probably been no worse example of this in the United States than during, and immediately after, the first World War. In 1917, federal legislation was passed making opposition to the war illegal, newspapers opposing the war were barred from the mails, censored and closed down, Socialist Party and trade union offices were wrecked, and large numbers of people were indiscriminately arrested.

In New York, in 1920, five members of the Socialist Party who were democratically elected to the State Legislature were refused admission to that body, and throughout the country workers who voiced opposition to the war were fired from their jobs.

#### **Band 10. The Speech That Sent Debs To Jail**

In September of 1915 Gene Debs gave his views of the war then raging in Europe:

"I am not a capitalist soldier. I am a proletarian revolutionist. . . I am opposed to every war but one; I am for that war with heart and soul, and that is the worldwide war of the social revolution. In that war I am prepared to fight in any way the ruling class may make necessary, even to the barricades. That is where I stand and where I believe the Socialist Party stands, or ought to stand, on the question of war."

In June of 1918, with American troops now fighting in Europe, Debs spoke to a socialist gathering in Canton, Ohio. In this, his most famous speech, he outlined the socialist opposition to the war and gave his unqualified support to the Russian Revolution which had just taken place under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky.

This was also the speech for which he was sentenced to jail.

"In the middle ages the feudal lords and barons, the

economic predecessors of the capitalists of our day, declared all wars. And their miserable serfs fought all the battles. The poor, ignorant serfs had been taught to revere their masters; to believe that when their masters declared war upon one another, it was their patriotic duty to fall upon each other and to cut one another's throats for the profit and glory of the lords and barons who held them in contempt. And that is war in a nutshell. It hasn't changed. The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles. The master class has had all to gain and nothing to lose, while the subject class has had nothing to gain and all to lose—especially their lives.

"The ruling class has always taught and trained you to believe it to be your patriotic duty to go to war and to have yourselves slaughtered at their command. But in all the history of the world, you, the people, have never had a voice in declaring war, and strange as it certainly appears, no war by any nation in any age has ever been declared by the people. And here let me emphasize the fact—and it cannot be repeated too often—that the working class who fight all the battles, the working class who make the supreme sacrifices, the working class who freely shed their blood and furnish the corpses, have never yet had a voice in either declaring war or making peace. It is the ruling class that invariably does both. They alone declare war and they alone make peace.

Yours not to reason why;

Yours but to do or die.

This is their motto and we object on the part of the awakening workers of this nation."

Two weeks after he gave his Canton, Ohio speech, Gene Debs was arrested and charged with violating the Espionage Act. Two months later he was tried, found guilty of the charges, and sentenced to ten years in prison.

#### **Band 11. The Last Days Of Eugene V. Debs**

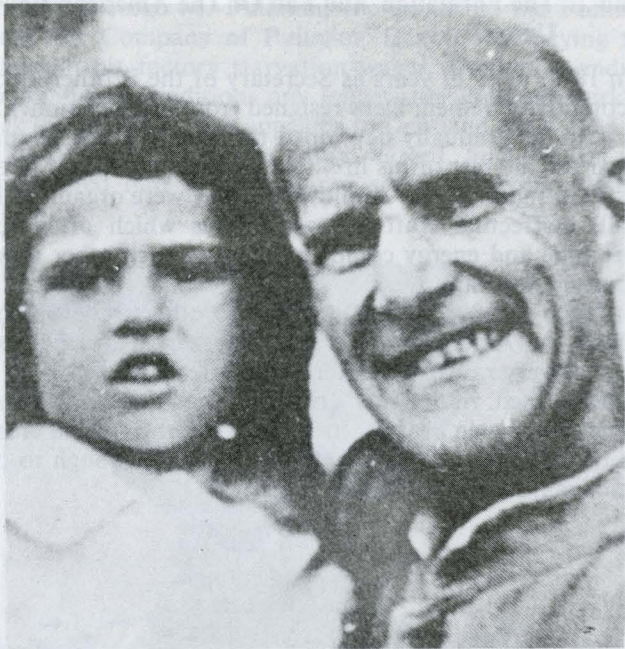
In 1920, while in the federal penitentiary in Atlanta, Debs was nominated for the fifth time as the Socialist Party's candidate for President. With a campaign that consisted of one press release a week, he received close to a million votes.

In 1921, after serving 2½ years of his term, the 66 year old Debs, in poor health, received a pardon from the newly elected President, Warren G. Harding, and returned home to Terre Haute.

On October 20, 1926 Eugene Victor Debs, the greatest leader in the history of the American working class, died—as people stood silently at the thousands of memorial meetings held in his honor throughout the country, some of them may have remembered what he said in Canton, Ohio.

"The little that I am, the little that I am hoping to be, I owe to the Socialist movement. It has given me my ideas and ideals; my principles and convictions, and I would not exchange one of them for all of Rockefeller's bloodstained dollars. It has taught me how to serve—a lesson to me of priceless value. It has taught me the ecstasy in the handclasp of a comrade. It has enabled me to hold high communion with you, and made it possible for me to take my place, side by side with you, in the great struggle for the better day; to multiply myself over and over again, to thrill with a fresh-born manhood; to feel life truly worthwhile; to open new avenues of vision; to spread out glorious vistas; to know that I am kin to all that throbs; to be class conscious, and to realize that, regardless of nationality, race, creed, color or sex, every man, every woman who toils, who renders useful service, every member of the working class without exception,

is my comrade, my brother and sister—and that to serve them and their cause is the highest duty of my life.”



The American People's Historical Society is a newly formed, non-profit organization producing audio-visual material from a radical point of view. As our nation becomes increasingly controlled by multi-billion dollar banks and giant corporations it is getting harder and harder for young people, and all Americans, to learn the truth about the history of their country - and about the men and women who have risked their lives to protect the interests of working people against capitalist greed. Day after day our television screens are filled with the likes of Starsky and Hutch and Wonderwoman but, not too surprisingly, no corporation or advertising agency seems terribly eager to sponsor a program dealing with the life and ideas of a man like Eugene V. Debs - a man who believed that working people should own and control the society in which they lived.

This record is the original sound-track of the video-tape "Debs" which is available for purchase or rental from the American People's Historical Society. For more information write the American People's Historical Society., 295½ Maple Street, Burlington, Vermont 05401, or call 802-864-7061

**Bernard Sanders**  
Director

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